Introduction:

The Poetics and Politics of Reading

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The Centre for Comparative Literature is, in many regards, the hub for the study of Comparative Literature in Canada. It became apparent to the students at the Centre that 2009 was a year worth celebrating: 40 years as a Centre, 20 annual conferences, and, with pride and sadness, the announcements of the retirements of University Professors Linda Hutcheon and J. Edward (Ted) Chamberlin. Professors Chamberlin and Hutcheon have both been awarded the highest teaching positions at Toronto, the title of University Professor, an honour they share with the Centre's founder, Northrop Frye. Much of this history has recently been elaborated in Mario J. Valdés's article in the *CRCL* (June 2009) and we do not aim to repeat it here.

The students decided in 2008 that it was time to celebrate and spotlight the extraordinary history of the Centre. Linda Hutcheon, as legend now seems to go, received the first doctorate from the Centre for Comparative Literature in 1975, and has throughout its entire history been an important voice and an inspiring reminder of the significance of Comparative Literature. The latter, of course, is also true of Ted Chamberlin, who reminds us that literature is not reduced to the written word alone; instead, we must venture beyond it to recognise the importance of oral narratives. Ted often serves as reminder of the professor beyond the ivory tower. We offer here some brief words on the careers of Professor Chamberlin and Professor Hutcheon, revised from their official university biographies.

J. Edward Chamberlin is a world-renowned literary scholar, critic and teacher, and a member of the Centre for Comparative Literature and the Department of English. Focusing on orality and oral and written cultures, interdisciplinarity, aboriginal studies and rights, and West Indian poetry, Professor Chamberlin's combination of literary, linguistic, anthropological, and sociological expertise has allowed him to make major contributions to the study of our human need for, or hope for, peaceful

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coexistence. His study of oral traditions in North America, Africa, and the Caribbean has led to a body of work that marks a watershed in postcolonial interdisciplinary studies, while his work among aboriginal groups has altered and renewed the direction of postcolonial research and pedagogy. His book *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* (2003) focuses on the telling of stories and fights the current political and social desire to stress differences between cultures.

Not only has Professor Chamberlin made important contributions to the scholarship in the area of native history and art, he has also been an invaluable figure in public policy development for over three decades. Beginning in the 1970s, Professor Chamberlin has served in a series of advisory roles to senior government officials, and has frequently been called upon to testify at land rights and self-government hearings (by provincial and federal governments, as well as aboriginal organizations). Professor Chamberlin's critically and popularly acclaimed book, *Come Back to Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* (1993), confirmed his reputation as one of the leading critics and theorists of the emerging literature of the West Indies. His work in this area is not only important in terms of the breadth and depth of its coverage of the field, but especially for the sensitivity of the critical response of the author and his impressively informed understanding of the historical, social and political contexts of the writing studied.

Professor Chamberlin holds a BA in Mathematics from the University of British Columbia (1964), a BA in English Language and Literature from Oxford University (1966), and a PhD in English from the University of Toronto (1969), with a thesis entitled "Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Modern Art," produced under the supervision of Northrop Frye. Some of his other books include: *Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped Civilizations* (2006); *Ripe was the Drowsy Hour: The Age of Oscar Wilde* (1977); and *The Harrowing of Eden: White Attitudes towards Native Americans* (1975). He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2000.

Linda Hutcheon, one of the best known and most highly renowned Canadian scholars in the humanities today, is a member of the Department of English and of the Centre for Comparative Literature. She has achieved broad international recognition as a literary theorist by helping to define and describe the idea and characteristics of postmodernism as a way of delineating the most recent period in literary history and through extended examination of verbal and cultural constructs such as irony and parody. Indeed, it has been said that she "virtually owns parody and irony. One simply cannot write on those topics without starting from or otherwise deeply engaging her work." Her studies of postmodernism have begun to shape the way that literary scholars and critics see the evolution of contemporary letters in the Western tradition.

Professor Hutcheon is also a major critic of contemporary Canadian writing and culture. More recently, she has emerged as an important interdisciplinary critic of opera, placing many of its themes and preoccupations within a revealing cultural and historical framework. In short, she is one of the most distinguished critics of

literature and one of the most influential and most interesting minds in modern literary criticism. Her work has been translated into many languages and is admired by scholars in Europe and Asia as well as in North America.

A prolific writer, Professor Hutcheon has more than a dozen books to her credit. Of particular note are: *Narcissistic Narrative* (1980); *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988); *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989; rpt. 2002); *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988); *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990); *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (1985); *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994), and *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). With Mario J. Valdés, she co-directed a project designed to study literary history using a new comparative model, leading to *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (2002). With her husband, Dr. Michael Hutcheon, she has published three books, *Opera: Desire, Disease and Death* (1996), *Bodily Charm: Living Opera* (2000), and *Opera: The Art of Dying* (2004). In these, they bring together the conceptual frameworks Linda Hutcheon has developed from literary theory to the world of music and spectacle, as seen through the lenses of medical history that Michael Hutcheon brings to bear.

Professor Hutcheon's scholarly achievements have been recognized through several awards and honours. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada since 1990, Professor Hutcheon counts among her research grants and fellowships a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Killam Research Fellowship, and most recently, the 2010 Molson Award in the social sciences and humanities. She is regarded as a superb teacher and in 1998 won the Northrop Frye Award, the University's highest award for teaching, which recognizes the integration of teaching and research. She has received honorary degrees from the University of Antwerp, the University of Helsinki, Concordia University, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Ghent, McMaster University, Memorial University, Uppsala University, and the University of Bucharest. She was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2011.

Given the careers of Chamberlin and Hutcheon it seemed imperative that we recognise them and their work in a fashion that matched their importance. Likewise, their retirements served as occasions to remind the University of the strength of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto—and in Canada. As the conference committee worked to figure out a way to make this happen, our motivating questions was: what connects the work of Chamberlin and Hutcheon? Surely it was not the fact that they shared the same working environment; there was something much deeper. But the committee was dealing with two very different academics: one professor known for her work on postmodernism, irony, satire, and most recently opera; the other known for his work on oral narratives, indigenous literature, and, of course, horses. We realised, however, that there was a common current in both Hutcheon and Chamberlin's work: the poetics and politics of reading. They both have taught us much about the actual idea and practice of reading: what does it mean to read? This question, and others that arise out of it, seemed to us to motivate much of

their work. We asked ourselves, therefore, some of the following questions:

- What is the difference between a subject-agent and a reader? Is there a difference? How must a subject-agent both fashion and position him- or herself in order to become a reader?

- What is a text and how does a reader approach it? What are the limits on what can be read? Must a text be recorded or written down in some way, or can it be a finite thing (such as an oral narrative), or an unstable and changing thing (such as a performance or another person)? Can anything with semiotic properties (such as a home, a horse, or a series of cultural artefacts) be read, or is there something unique in the process of reading written literature?

- What does reading do for the reader? Is there some sort of fundamental human need to read? What might it be? Does reading stabilize the Self, or destabilize the Self, or does the Self only emerge in the first place as a consequence of reading? Can reading in new ways contribute to new self-understanding and new understanding of others? How?

- To what extent is it possible to read a text that is foreign to one's own experience, e.g., a text rooted in the experience of another time, another place, another gender, another sexuality, another class, etc.? What roles do power relations and social antagonism play in reading this kind of text? Does this kind of reading concretize or destabilize power relations and social antagonisms, or does it do something else? What are the ethics of reading another's text?

- What is the distinction between observing and respecting alternative reading practices and orientalizing or exoticizing them? Can one learn to read the way readers in other cultures or socio-economic groups do?

- What is the relationship of reading practices to economic and cultural life? Does the former change as a consequence of the latter, or vice versa? Or is there a dialectical relationship, and what might that look like?

- How can the study of aesthetic form connect to a larger picture of history and cultural life? How able is a reader to approach the study of form from a position of objectivity? Is this even desirable?

The essays in this collection engage with different facets of these questions, and are but a small selection of the nearly 30 talks that were given over the two and a half days of the conference.

Keavy Martin's contribution to this collection, "A Text of a Different Colour"—a transcription of her talk on the second day of the conference in March 2009—offers a personal reflection on Ted Chamberlin's career, and his influence on her development as an academic, but more importantly, on her development as a reader. Martin, now an assistant professor of Aboriginal Literatures at the University of Alberta and Ted Chamberlin's last doctoral student at the Centre for Comparative Literature, reads Chamberlin's reading of horses in his 2006 book, *Horse: How the Horse Has Shaped*

Civilizations as a meditation on all the many facets of reading and interpreting texts, facets that have numerous implications for us as academics and as readers. Martin notes that like horses, we want texts to surprise us, to keep us engaged, wondering, and on our toes; without that, our texts are just tractors: they may get the job done, but the ride is kind of boring.

Yves St-Cyr, one of Linda Hutcheon's recent doctoral students at the Centre for Comparative Literature, offers "Desire, Disease, Death, and David Cronenberg: The Operatic Anxieties of *The Fly*," in which he offers a Hutcheonite reading of the various adaptations of George Langelaan's 1957 short story. St-Cyr traces the sexualization of disease and death through seven incarnations of *The Fly*, from short story, to film, to opera house, arguing that not only in its final adaptation as opera, but also in all of its previous versions, the story engages deeply with illness, love, and mortality, the very characteristics that Linda and Michael Hutcheon argue are central to the operatic stage. Despite cultural anxieties that shift from the 1950s to the 1980s to the 2000s, *The Fly* saga remains throughout entirely operatic; indeed, St-Cyr leads us to the conclusion that Langelaan's story could almost not have avoided its eventual adaptation into an opera.

Luis Othoniel Rosa's paper, "Taking a Risk: Wound-readers: Derrida and Frankenstein's Monster," engages with the problems of interpreting texts and "reading against interpretation," seeking to remind his readers of the wounding power of reading and the risks that are at stake in this engagement with the text. Alternating between reading two different reading experiences—one which wounds, one in which the wounding is rejected—Rosa sets forth on a textual journey in an attempt to revision the hermeneutic function of reading. Moving through Derrida's reading of Gadamer's reading of Paul Celan, Rosa argues that the oppositional nature of Derrida's deconstruction and Gadamer's hermeneutics offer an almost complementary way of reading Celan's poem, "Rams." After working through some of the risks of this reading, Rosa moves to look at the reading experiences of Frankenstein's Monster, whose inability to distance himself from, and consequently interpret, what he reads leads to the fragmentation of his fragile understanding of self, and his eventual self-destruction.

Meredith Gill's offering, "Absent Causality and Shocking Connections: The Question of Revolutionary Reading in Louis Althusser and E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*," examines the ways Althusser attempts to read absence at the end of his life and the way Doctorow's title character, Daniel Lewin, fails to read it. As with Rosa's "wound-reading," Gill's reading engages with notions of electricity and circuitry as she says, "Electricity[…]functions here as a metaphor for thought and its inescapable dialectical relationship between resistance and complicity." We, the monstrous readers described by Doctorow's Daniel, are the ones who can and must complete the circuit by moving from and joining one word to the next.

Jennifer Row's contribution to this collection, "Uncommon Placement: Reading Sexuality and Masochism in the 19th-Century Commonplace Book," examines ways

of reading sexuality and desire across time. Acknowledging the inherent difficulties for modern scholars to the understanding of formulations of sexuality in the past, Row reads John William Sterling's commonplace book as an "archive of affect" that is as revealing—if not more so—as the traditional auto-representative genres of diaries, letters, wills, and journals. By performing a close reading of reading practices, themselves exemplified by entries in Sterling's commonplace book, Row suggests the richness of reading about reading, and all the many ways that it can contribute to our understanding.

Our 2009 conference featured keynote addresses by Sander L. Gilman (Emory) and Mario J. Valdés (Emeritus, Toronto). Professor Gilman used his time to present a talk entitled "Reading and Life: Linda and Ted," a retrospective—and something of a celebrity roast! Professor Valdés gave a lecture entitled "Poetry at War: Reading the Spanish Civil War." In addition, Linda and Ted each presented an honorary lecture on the opening evening of the conference, "Luck: A Reader's Story," by Linda and "The Yard and the Tower: A Life in School, Song, and Story," by Ted. Audio recordings of all these lectures, as well as Russell Kilbourn's moving introduction to Linda and Ted are available for download on the Centre's website.

We are deeply committed to the many lessons that University Professors J. Edward Chamberlin and Linda Hutcheon have taught us. These pieces, collected together, stand as a testament to the value and importance of Comparative Literature as a discipline, and to the scholars who offer promising hints of the future of literature, literary theory, and cultural criticism. Finally, we hope they offer a glimpse of the stakes of reading; our continued active engagement with reading, as Linda and Ted have shown us, is one of our most important contributions as scholars, students, and members of society.